

“Weblogs and Journalism: an uneasy relation (the Portuguese case)”

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Abstract

Portugal's adherence to weblogs has experienced both an explosion and a shift in nature in 2003. Indeed, the year began with less than 200 registered weblogs and ended with more than 3000. The initial close knit community, where weblogs were predominantly used for personal expression, gave way to a more heterogeneous one, with some newcomers assuming the activity in a semi-professional manner. People with a special interest in the dissemination of information were amongst this group fuelling a debate (or debates) on weblogs as a new form of journalism (unedited and participatory) and on the role of traditional media. The first national weblog meeting – which took place at *Universidade do Minho* – reflected such discussions further.

In this paper – produced under the scope of an ongoing project of observation of media and society interaction in Portugal, *Mediascópio* – we will depart from an analysis of media reports and weblogs' posts to present an exploratory framework of the intersections between Portuguese journalism and weblogs and try to discuss possible symptoms of change in the perception that journalists have of their audiences.

The year of the Weblog

It is increasingly difficult to consider a reading of social behaviour in modern societies without the contributions of signals picked up from cyberspace. The Internet, perceived by many as the fabric of society itself (Castells, 2004), stands out as the present day embodiment of the transparent ‘total communication’ dream, where participation and interaction result from multiform permanent exchanges between equals. Relevant to our concerns seems to be the fact that unlike traditional media environments’ the Internet’s information flow is not based on a unidirectional transference model but rather on a mixed paradigm ecosystem, where old and new appear in no pre-determined order and where clear dominance today might not mean that much tomorrow. It thus becomes the ideal ground for experimental and possibly subversive ideas.

Weblogs appropriately fit into this framework and their recent and almost exponential proliferation is a testament to both their appeal and flexibility. ‘Personal publication’, a concept previously used to attract people to the Internet itself, seems to have found a new and more concrete dimension. Weblogs have become alternative spaces for communication, where each participant can aspire to have the ‘voice’ that had been promised. True as it may be that an effective participation in the blogosphere might have as much of ego-projection as of voyeurism, the fact remains that those ‘voices’ are still there, in most cases open to discussion and invariably willing to be scrutinised. As Tim Jarrett puts it: “the blogger creates an online voice with history, chronology, evolution, and context”. More relevantly, the act of weblog publishing (by contrast with a private document) allows others to listen to the said ‘voice: “If the blogger’s words are heard, and others enter into dialog, the blogger has ceased to be a passive observer of the Internet and has instead become a creator of it. This enables people—whether 12-year-old confused adolescents, 24-year-old software programmers in cubicle farms, 30-year-old Iraqi translators in Baghdad reporting from inside a war, or sixty-year-old grandmothers with a passion for presidential politics—who might never have written anything before to be read around the world”¹. Even if we accept a degree of frailty in this final assertion, mainly due to the inherently unruly and unsystematic growth of the blogosphere, that should not detract us from its main anchoring point – the idea that weblogs are personal interpretative spaces simultaneously marked by subjectivity and a degree of responsibility.

¹ Post published on ‘Jarrett House North’, under the heading ‘Blogs providing voices’.
<http://discuss.jarretthousenorth.com/2003/10/10?print-friendly=true>.

In trying to assess ‘why people blog’, Nardi et al. have noted that they do it for a variety of reasons and often for more than one reason. Included motivations were “documenting one’s life, providing commentary and opinions, working out emotional issues, ‘thinking by writing’, and promoting conversation and community” (15). Addressing the same broad question – the likelihood of adoption - Lilia Efimova has pointed out that more often than not bloggers tend to be passionately curious people, with a profound appetite for writing, not afraid to expose ideas and concerned about passing them on to others or ‘paying back’ to their community, believers in articulation as a means to a better understanding, and enthusiastic about feedback and critical discussion (2003). The appeal to a very particular individuality (whether that precedes or not any branching out to a community²) seems to be at the core of this unique digital genre hybrid which might even be considered as the ‘missing link’ between standard web pages and asynchronous computer mediated communication in the ecology of the Internet (Herring et al, 2004: 9).

Defined by Jill Walker, in the forthcoming *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*(2005), as frequently updated websites consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order, published by individuals in a personal and informal style, using links generously, and ranging in genre from the ‘confessional online diary’ to the micro-thematic (sometimes) group produced information centre, weblogs have seen an upsurge in their interest and influence mostly after 2003.

The most popular weblog tool, Blogger, announced in January that year that it had reached its first million users and a study by Perseus Development Corporation estimated that by mid-2003 some 4,12 million weblogs had already been created worldwide (03.10.2003). From August AOL started to offer its clients the possibility to blog, whilst Yahoo initiated a similar experience in its Korean site. Both companies followed in the footsteps of two other giants, who had entered the weblog market earlier – Google and Lycos. Given the gratuitous nature of the service its first purpose might have been to ensure customer fidelity, although the prospect of a commercial use must surely have been considered by these companies. An evident sign of the awakening of commercial interest in weblogs – and the possible demise of what is perceived as the format’s puritanical character³ – must have been the publication, by mid August 2003, of an article in *The Economist*, under the heading: “Blogging, to the horror of some, is trying to go commercial”⁴.

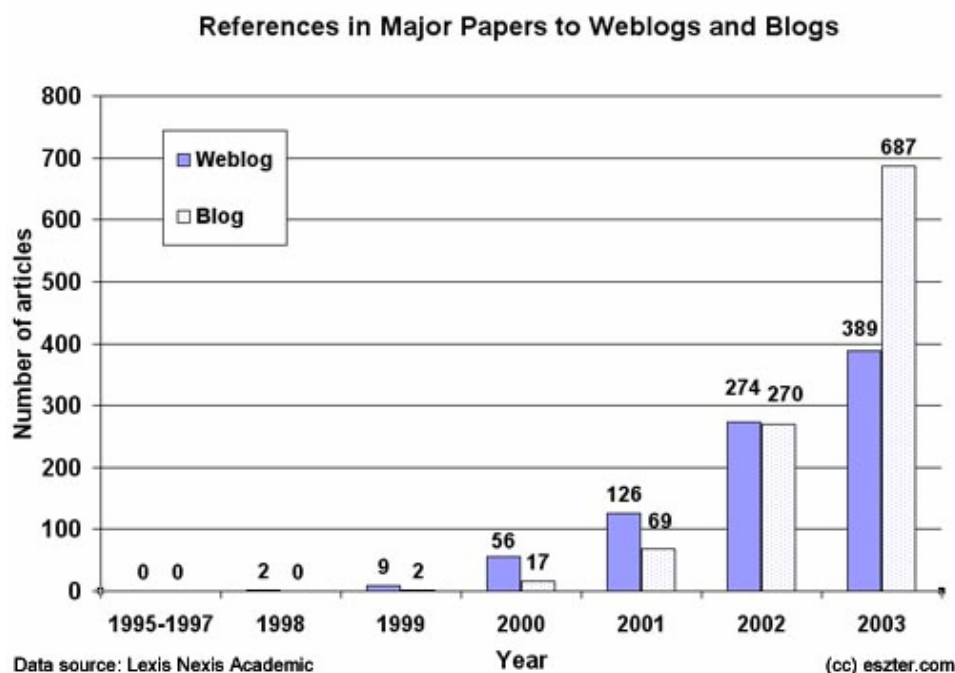
² Also known as a webring.

³ http://alwayson-network.com/printpage.php?id=840_0_2_0 (10.09.2003).

⁴ *The Economist* (14.08.2003).

The visibility of Weblogs has increased proportionally to their direct impact on the news agendas and sub-categories like warblogs⁵ and political oriented blogs have managed to attract a significant volume of attention at very specific periods (i.e. Trent Lott resignation, Howard Dean's campaign, Abu Ghraib violence, Democratic Party Convention). The heightened relevance of Indexation tools like Technorati⁶, Blogdex, Daypop, or Popdex hinted at the beginning of a process of structural sedimentation of the format whilst technological evolutions have prompted the appearance of image-centred variants like moblogs or videoblogs.

A very graphic illustration of this is given by Eszeter Hargittai's work on newspaper and magazine citations containing the words 'weblog' and 'blog' (see below). Departing from a 47 publication universe (including 24 north-American) she observed that references in 2003 alone had been greater than in the whole period from 1995 to 2002, and that for that same year the average number of references per newspaper had been close to 23 (almost once every two weeks).



Notwithstanding the substantial difference in scale, 2003 has also been the year of the weblog explosion in Portugal. The first consistent attempt at elaborating a listing mentioned 174 entries in January. By May, Portuguese weblogs had reached 400, and by July that same year

⁵ Further reading on this particular sub-category: Orihuela (2003), Almiron (2004), Martín and Calero (2004), and Recuero (2003).

⁶ On July 7 2004, Technorati announced it was following up more than 3 million weblogs and that new entries were being registered at a pace of more than 15.000 per day (<http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000356.html>).

905 had been accounted for⁷. At the present there is no single list of Portuguese weblogs, although it could be said that they must exceed two thousand. Created in July 2003, ‘PTbLOGGERS’⁸ registered, on July 21 2004, 2283 weblogs. Another directory, ‘Apdeites’⁹, had 2362 entries, whilst ‘Weblog.com.pt’¹⁰ (promoter of Movable Type tool) listed 1058 weblogs. Similarly to what happened internationally, Portugal’s most successful search engine/provider, *Sapo*, started its own weblogs service from November 2003, although no data is provided on its success. Though immensely distant in absolute terms, the Portuguese blogosphere seems to be adopting a growth rate very akin to the international one and, relevantly to our endeavours, such an increase has been the subject of very significant media attention and, equally relevant, it has been accompanied by the emergence of spaces / moments of self-questioning.

Weblogs in Portuguese media

It could easily be inferred, from the above mentioned data, that weblogs have witnessed an upsurge in interest after May 2003 and such a progression coincided with a substantial increase in traditional media’s interest for the format. Indeed, on May 4th *Público* dedicated its Media section to weblogs and their massification, under the rather curious general heading: “Journalism challenged by a new format”. Only six days after, *Diário de Notícias* announced that a well-known and highly respected politician/academic, José Pacheco Pereira, had adhered to the blogosphere, with its ‘Abrupto’ (which received almost 1 million visits in one year and, in July 2004, registered an average 3800 visits per day¹¹). The same text would present us with a listing of other famous bloggers, and also with an extremely benign discussion on the variety of subjects covered by Portuguese blogs: politics (with ferocious intellectual debate between opposing sides), literature, communication and humour.

A few weeks later, *Diário Económico* would publish a text under the heading “Portugal adheres to Weblogs in droves”, adding that politics was the main subject of attraction due to the format’s ability to promote “freedom of expression”. In that same text, António Granado (which updates his ‘Ponto Media’ since January 2002) would propose that the Portuguese

⁷ The manager of <http://blogsempot.blogspot.com>, Pedro Fonseca, admitted that he could no longer continue with the task.

⁸ <http://www.omeudiario.net/ptbloggers>

⁹ <http://apdeites.cedilha.com/numeros.html>

¹⁰ <http://weblog.com.pt>

¹¹ <http://abrupto.blogspot.com>

blogosphere was entering a new phase – the phase of general public discovery – and that each new article in the traditional press would be followed by the creation of a “few more dozens” of Weblogs (26.05.2003). That same day, *Público*’s tech supplement, ‘Computadores’, included texts by Pedro Fonseca on the first European weblog meeting, BlogTalk, which was taking place in Vienna.

One week latter, that same supplement would provide ample wrap-up coverage of the conference, and by mid-June, *Público*’s editor, José Manuel Fernandes, would dedicate the newspaper editorial space to the announced end of a weblog, ‘Coluna Infame’. Even to those who were not familiar with the format it was said, on line 2: “the blogosphere is poorer”. In all, *Público* would dedicate 18 texts to Weblogs that month, in different areas of the newspaper (Media, ‘Computadores’, Top Story, Editorial, Opinion) and as a result of the work of several journalists, one correspondent, its editor, and invited columnists. One particular column, written by the above mentioned Pacheco Pereira on June 19th – “Espelho Meu, Espelho Meu” – has constituted one of the most relevant moments in the construction of a media image for weblogs in Portugal.

The following week – still in June – the most successful weekly magazine, *Visão*, would present an extensive work under the main heading: “Welcome to the blogosphere”. Two days latter, columnist José Mário Silva would write in *Diário de Notícias* about weblogs’ attributes and his own experience with the format. On that same day, June 28th, *Expresso* – the biggest expansion weekly newspaper – would dedicate a considerable space in its magazine (‘Única’) to an interview with the anonymous writer of one of the most talked about weblogs of that moment, ‘O meu pipi’. To cap up a weekend filled with references, *Correio da Manhã* would, the following morning, present the “new cybernetic fad” to its readership, together with a list of some ‘blogotugas’¹², and also some ‘blogopérolas’ (blog-pearls).

In July the Portuguese Parliament approved the creation of members’ weblogs (starting from the next legislative session¹³); another renowned columnist, Miguel Esteves Cardoso, would write in *Diário de Notícias*’ supplement, DNA, that weblogs were “a nervous and good breeze, not felt since the days of Punk and New Wave”¹⁴; Ana Sá Lopes would confess her “blogodependency”¹⁵; and Francisco José Viegas would take the opportunity to write in his weekly space at *Jornal de Notícias* that a “battle for the voice” was underway¹⁶. By that time,

¹² ‘Tugas’ is a slang expression for ‘Portuguese’, mainly used by Portuguese speaking Africans.

¹³ As it happened the first one to become active was Socialist MP José Magalhães’, on May 6 2004. By July 2004 out of a universe of 230 members only three had active weblogs (<http://blogs.parlamento.pt/indice/>).

¹⁴ *Diário de Notícias*, DNA, 14.07.2003.

¹⁵ *Público*, 13.07.2003.

¹⁶ *Jornal de Notícias*, 25.07.2003.

Pacheco Pereira was already showing concerns about the non-existence of a ‘legal repository’ for the Portuguese Internet, thus broadening a debate – on the nature and purpose of the blogosphere itself – which he had undertaken from the start at his own ‘Abrupto’.

On July 19th *Diário de Notícias* announced the upcoming first national meeting of weblogs and on two other separate instances the subject would be referred to again. The newspaper ombudsperson, Estrela Serrano, would also comment on weblogs, within a reflection on the growing access of citizens to the public sphere. That month would end with Eduardo Prado Coelho using his weekly column in *Público* to talk of “the absence of a complex web of legitimisations” to access the media arena as a substantial novelty¹⁷, and with Paulo Mendo praising, in *Primeiro de Janeiro*, the “blessed invasion”¹⁸.

The use of weblogs to teach journalism – an experience started at *Universidade do Minho* - justified an extensive work, in *Público*, at the beginning of August. Both *Público* and *Jornal de Notícias* maintained a regular stream of news on the subject throughout that month, some of them reflecting what bloggers were writing on topic issues, like the political actions of Lisbon’s mayor, for instance¹⁹.

By mid September, the main focus of media attraction would be the first national weblog meeting, which took place at *Universidade do Minho*. For the first time however media coverage of weblogs extended from print to radio and television; a live feature on the main news bulletin of Portuguese state owned television (RTP1) happened on the same day Portugal’s biggest circulation newspaper, *Jornal de Notícias*, made weblogs the main story on its front page.

The novelty effect having been almost exhausted, weblog references became scarcer and, as the year grew to a close, news stories tended to focus less on the format and/or its nature but rather on emerging less virtual by-products; a cable TV channel, Sic-Radical, announced that ‘Gato Fedorento’ (a humour weblog) would become a television show, and soon after the announcement was made of the launching of a book containing a compilation of ‘O meu pipi’²⁰.

¹⁷ *Público*, 31.07.2003.

¹⁸ *O Primeiro de Janeiro*, 31.07.2004.

¹⁹ *Público*, 31.08.2003.

²⁰ A now inactive weblog which registered more than 100.000 visits per month at the height of its popularity, in October 2003 (<http://www.sitemeter.com/stats/default.asp?action=stats&site=sm7omeupipi&report=36>).

Weblogs and their appeal to journalism

Even though this is just a tentative first observation of this relationship between weblogs and the Portuguese media it seems possible to point out some related ideas needing further analysis.

A substantial part of the appeal of Weblogs simply results from its intrinsic characteristics. Easy to handle tools, even for someone with little technical expertise, they combine a formally rigid structure with the possibility to encompass a myriad of contents. The blogosphere might hence be understood as a novel ‘work environment’, no longer present in individual computers but available for sharing on the Internet. Once familiarised with a weblog, most bloggers are able to look for information on another or to create their own with very little effort. Even if we are to account for the peculiarities of each tool, the logic of the format remains the same, and it is precisely the comfort derived from such consistency which both guarantees tranquillity and renewed self-confidence – two fundamental traits when taking into account another mark of weblogs’ distinctiveness, the updating frequency. Similarly to what has happened in other countries – with differing degrees of encouraging by the traditional media – the success of Weblogs in Portugal is also a direct result of this concrete potential for the opening up of an individual expression environment far beyond the borders of personal acquaintances circles.

However, more often than not matters relating to technological developments tend to be considered attractive by the media, even though internal publishing logics might tend to embellish them come presentation time. Such seems to have been the case with Weblogs, where the same emphasis seems to have been put on issues relating to the format’s advantages and on more trivial considerations, like the ‘famous people’ dimension, for instance.

By the same token, technological advancements which proved to be successful elsewhere are traditionally perceived by Portuguese media in a wholly benign way. The appeal of the ‘arrival’, underlined by the notion that each new development brings the country closer to the most developed nations, seems to be particularly enticing for Portuguese media, though explanations for this behaviour should be found in areas other than the scope of this study permits (national identity studies).

This propensity to welcome in an almost unconditional manner foreign tested technological advances helps us to read the unusually high prominence given to weblogs. It should be noted, at this point, that recent figures (INE, 2003) show that only 21,7 per cent of Portuguese homes have internet access, and that almost 70 per cent of the population has never used it. Of

those who do, only a fraction have or have ever visited weblogs²¹. Although numbers are increasing at a very significant rate, it still seems difficult to justify a 5 minute live slot on a major television news bulletin based on relevance criteria or, for that matter, the major headline in the country's biggest newspaper. That said, two other factors seem to have played a part in this equation. On the one hand, the adherence of known Portuguese figures (artists, politicians, writers, academics), the immediate appearance of polemic debates, and the demise of any attempts at creating some sort of hierarchical stratification²² provided journalists with a steady flow of varied information of the evolution of the Portuguese blogosphere. On the other hand, a considerable number of journalists have joined the weblog community themselves. That adherence results – we gather – from the establishment of an immediate complicity between journalists and this particular format, both in terms of structure and contents. If we consider structure for a moment, weblogs seem to easily fit into the demands of present day journalistic time management, they are prepared to incorporate multimedia synergies, and they welcome – indeed promote – appealing and logically constructed text. If we are to consider contents, we easily identify in weblogs some of the desired characteristics of what has been asked of journalism in recent years: greater and more explicit reference to sources, increased personalisation of production, incorporation of readers feedback, less formal rigidity, and less intermediation.

Individual publication and journalism

The expansion of the Portuguese blogosphere in 2003 has induced heated debates on the added value of weblogs to journalism, most of them replicating similar discussions elsewhere. It was also easy to identify in Portugal excessive faith on the potentiality of the new format to single-handedly open the gates of a new type of journalism²³, and its counterpoint position, with its excessive condemnation of such proximity, based on the notion that the blogosphere should be a journalism-free area.

We should say that, at present, the Portuguese blogosphere has its own share of weblogs on journalism and communication studies, and of weblogs by professional journalists. It does not

²¹ In this particular area it could be said that the Portuguese reality is still very far from the American one, if we are to take at face value data released in February 2004 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, according to which some 2 per cent of the population have their own Weblogs and 11 per cent are frequent readers of Weblogs (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Content_Creation_Report.pdf).

²² Up until late 2003 debates abounded on the broad topic: old and new bloggers ('old' meaning, sometimes, having created a weblog some 6 months sooner than someone else). The sheer volume of incomers has henceforth diluted these exchanges.

²³ Could it be the 'way new journalism' that Joshua Quittner talked about in 2001?

however have too many examples of what could be described as journalistic oriented weblogs, where recognisable journalistic activity is pursued in a consistent and permanent manner²⁴.

Even so, it must be said that the attained considerable visibility of some weblogs, the militant activism of others, the formal quality of much of the produced text, and the social and political critical character of a significant number of published posts, when perceived in tandem with a multiplication of reasonably well informed primary sources on many specific areas and with journalists interest for the format might induce some effects on the traditional conception of journalism. Portugal might not have reached a point where weblogs are able to influence and/or promote sea-changing social and political transformations with repercussions on traditional media (like the Trent Lott affair), nor have we witnessed campaigns to follow the work of particular journalists, but some signs of increasing interaction seem to exist:

- In the wake of the recent political crisis (June 2004), a very significant number of weblogs carried a particular banner opposing the decision not to call a general election and some of them actively promoted demonstrations, in several cities, against such a decision.
- Politicians increasingly use their weblogs to comment on their parties' internal life and such comment is now often used by journalists when producing stories on a particular matter.
- Raw information presented in weblogs is increasingly being used by traditional journalism to pursue newsworthy stories.
- The carrying of a sloppy news story on the possibility of the National Communications Authority (ANACOM) taking measures to curtail the expansion of weblogs (Expresso, May 11th 2004) spurred a wave of protest publishing in weblogs, in the newspaper's comments section, and also in traditional media. As a result the newspaper was forced to publish an apology for the mistake.
- Three journalists from 'Primeiro de Janeiro' were fired (April 26th 2004) as the alleged result of their writings on the internal problems of the newspaper in a weblog, 'Diário de um Jornalista'.

This awareness of the blogosphere's presence and of its particular attention to what is produced by the traditional media could function as an additional pressure factor for editors and journalists alike, promoting a possible reformulation of language, news priorities, and

²⁴ One of the exception, although produced under the scope of a higher education project is 'JornalismoPortoNet' (<http://jpn.icicom.up.pt/>).

especially attitude towards society. Bloggers (who are also readers/listeners/viewers) question actions and perspectives, point out flaws, present alternative views on issues, and raise new doubts. The potential is there for this to be understood by journalists as an opportunity to produce better, more honest, and more socially aware journalism.

At the present weblogs are thus much more the critical reflections of Portuguese journalism and potential providers of additional information than equal-footed competition. To their benefit, these personal publishing spaces will always integrate, without any adaptation, an individually based communication logic, as nodes in multiple and flexible webs, rather than members of particular and easily identifiable groups (wellman and Hogan, 2004). Taking for granted that even in developed societies such a model is only useful to interpret the activities of a restricted group of individuals, we are able to perceive in weblogs (as in webmail, fotologs or moblogs) the potential to act as connecting tools, linking the individual to his/her own nets, in a position of absolute control and irrespective of his/her's geographical location²⁵. In a rather provocative discussion, anticipating BloggerCon II, Jay Rosen wrote: "Blogging is not journalism, but whereas journalism is *on* the Web, blogging is deeply of it, and so bloggers are ahead of journalists in learning what the Web is for, and how its ecology works"(16.04.2004).

John Pavlik's 2001 (over) optimistic view – weblogs as "better journalism", thanks to their links to an "increasingly suspicious and alienated audience" (5) – has not yet found concrete expression, mainly due to issues relating to the exercise of journalism itself rather than due to the potentialities of the new format. Weblogs may indeed, as Kaye Trammell points out, be spaces where random acts of journalism are performed (03.04.2004) yet that depends almost exclusively on their authors particular circumstances, rather than on the format itself. Furthermore, journalism still needs financial support and it "involves actually interviewing people, doing thorough background research on a subject, presenting a rounded and dispassionate overview, and reasoning through substantive arguments" (Macdonald, 18.04.2004), something that very few bloggers are willing to do.

In the present context, Rebecca Blood's proposal seems to be aptly put: "Instead of inflating the term 'journalism' to include everyone who writes anything about current events, I prefer the term 'participatory media' for the blogger's practice of actively highlighting and framing the news that is reported by journalists, a practice potentially as important as - but different from – journalism" (2003a). More than to debate whether weblogs should strive to get closer

²⁵ A space where individuals can base their e-mail, weblogs, and fotologs has been launched in Galicia in April 2004 (www.intper.es).

to journalism, in style as in practices, in order to earn added respectability (as Rosen suggests, *op.cit.*), it would seem more appropriate to promote closer cooperation between these two activities. Traditional media could make available not only their products but also the source materials, closer cooperation with universities could be pursued in order to create media citizenship centres (the natural breeding ground for the 'hiper-local journalist'), and efficient ways could be found to use the enormous amount of information made available through weblogs (Witt, 14.04.2004). The inevitability of a shift of sorts - also in Portugal - seems to be indisputable as we progress from a Big Media/consumers paradigm to a more flexible arrangement. Journalism may just find its way to change from a lecture style to a more conversational one (Gillmor: XIII), adopting, in the process, contributions from weblogs.

On a final note, it still seems to ambitious the notion that the tentative assumption of communicative power by an increasingly larger group of internet 'users-turned-producers' already points towards the dilution of contents validation barriers (gatekeeping), and towards a substancial change in the (uni)direction of communication fluxes (hence towards a democratisation of information). By the same token it would seem reductionist to simply focus on the disadvantages of contents pulverisation, the weaknesses of new creators' amateur posture, and also on the precocious character of any evaluation which dims the still overwhelming unidirectionality of informative fluxes.

Still, even if we accept that much of what is published in weblogs is still reactive – be it commentary, opinion, or even the presentation of facts to contradict earlier news – it is clear that the blogosphere has constituted itself as a disruptive space: there is room for new ideas (especially because the idea is still more valued than its source), there are signs of a new process of shared knowledge creation, there is a greater de-centralisation of contents production and distribution, and there is a reformulation of traditional conceptions on audience and receiver.

That might not be journalism as we now know it and it may also not be journalism as it will be in the future. But it surely constitutes a novel way to interact and participate in that activity.

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Other secondary sources:

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